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Koistinen, Timo

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The Personal in Philosophy of Religion

Timo Koistinen

In *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (2014) John Cottingham develops a new kind of philosophy of religion which clearly differs from standard approaches in this field of study.[1] He argues that dominant approaches in analytic philosophy of religion include a misleading view of the nature and role of reason in the religious life. Cottingham notes that a large part of university introductory courses in philosophy of religion focus on "the examination of 'pure' rational demonstrations or probabilistic arguments about God's existence, which are intended to appeal to any rational inquirer, irrespective of their personal commitments or religious beliefs". [2] Cottingham's observation is correct, and it is also worth noting that almost all introductory books in philosophy of religion lay much emphasis on arguments about God's existence. For those who are unfamiliar with the field this may be somewhat surprising, for there is a strong tradition in modern philosophy and theology that calls into question the meaningfulness of efforts of philosophical rationalist theism. In modern philosophy it has commonly been thought that Hume's and Kant's criticisms gave fatal blows to the efforts to demonstrate God's existence. In addition, modern theology has been influenced by Kant in this respect, and, in general, philosophical theism has not been a visible approach among modern theologians from Schleiermacher to Barth and Tillich. Furthermore, even in contemporary analytic theism some well-known authors, such as Plantinga, have called into question the assumption that religious faith needs propositional or argumentative evidence. Notwithstanding all this, the majority of analytic philosophers who are interested in religious matters assume that a central aim of philosophy of religion is to examine the rational acceptability of religious truth claims. The discussion is often based on the assumption that universal rationality exists, and the central aim of study is an impartial investigation of the truth and rationality of religious beliefs.

The ideal of impartiality and objectivity of philosophical reason has not been taken for granted outside the analytic philosophy of religion. For example, in hermeneutical and postmodern philosophy of religion the ideals of the Enlightenment have been subjected to severe criticism. Therefore, Cottingham's more humane approach is interesting from the point of view of the

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[1] John Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion: Towards a More Humane Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Cottingham has worked on this "more humane approach" to philosophy of religion and to ethics in many of his publications. See, e.g., John Cottingham, *The Spiritual Dimension: Religion, Philosophy and Human Value* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[2] Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 9.

analytic-continental divide in contemporary philosophy.[3] In this paper, I will explore ways in which Cottingham's approach is related to a current in analytic philosophy of religion that differs from the dominant rationalist theism/atheism, namely Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion.[4]

Philosophy and Religious Convictions

Cottingham finds the standard approach unsatisfactory for several reasons. He does not deny the value of the critical discussion and analysis of arguments for and against theism, nor is he a spokesman for fideism or radical relativism.[5] Nevertheless, he argues that it is misleading to assume that philosophers' personal commitments are irrelevant in evaluating arguments for and against religious beliefs. According to Cottingham, the ideal of detachment, associated with the impersonal – scientific or metaphysical – perspective leaves out essential dimensions of religious beliefs. In place of this hyperintellectualist approach, Cottingham offers an approach for philosophy of religion which connects the field more closely with the spiritual, moral, psychological and aesthetic aspects that play a central role in the actual forms of religious life.

Cottingham's approach sheds light on many principal methodological questions that are related to the specific character of philosophy of religion. Philosophy of religion differs from some other areas of philosophy, as questions in this field have often directly to do with philosophers' own personal convictions. Religious questions have a significant personal involvement and personal commitments often shape the practice of philosophy of religion: personal convictions obviously motivate and guide the formulation of research questions and methods of study. As is well known, many prominent authors understand their task as arguing for their own religious or atheistic worldviews. Cottingham stresses that personal factors do not only motivate research, but they are essential elements in evaluating the truth and acceptability of religious worldviews. He insists that this personal and human dimension of religious thought should be taken much more seriously than philosophers usually do. Purely analytic, intellectual and reflective approaches which focus on evaluating the truth and rationality of abstract factual assertions do not get in touch with the meaning religion actually has in human life. Indeed, it is striking that the discussion of theism is

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[3] For a discussion on the analytic-continental divide in philosophy of religion, see Nick Trakakis, *The End of Philosophy of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2008).

[4] Some of the issues concerning the Wittgensteinian method in philosophy of religion are taken up in my "D. Z. Phillips' Contemplative Conception of Philosophy," *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 53 (2011): 333–356; "The Vantage Point of Disinterested Inquiry. On the Neutrality of D. Z. Phillips' Philosophy of Religion," *Studia Theologica* 66 (2012): 130–148.

[5] Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 19–20.

nowadays often highly technical and complex. In analysing religious matters philosophers of religion use logical, epistemological and metaphysical tools and theories developed in other fields of philosophy. There is good reason to ask how well this approach serves those who are troubled by questions about the truth of religious beliefs, for the technical and abstract approach alienates philosophy of religion from personal and existential aspects of religious faith and makes the debate somewhat artificial.

Cottingham stresses that religious truth claims cannot be isolated from our life experiences – from our emotional sensibilities and moral considerations – without distorting them. It is a central teaching of many religious traditions that the genuine understanding of religious faith can be gained only through slow processes in an individual's moral and spiritual life. Religious faith is not an impersonal attitude. Instead, it most crucially has to do with people's inner life – with the question "Who am I?" In this respect, religious life is closer to art than science. In fact, religion and art have a historically close relationship, and Cottingham holds that the personal aspects of religion are internally related to imaginative, symbolic and poetic levels of understanding, which are often missing in philosophical discussions on religion in the analytic tradition.

Cottingham's views find parallels in the classics of philosophy of religion. His "humane approach" receives support from Pascal, Anselm, Aquinas, Descartes, Jean-Luc Marion and Ludwig Wittgenstein, among others. I will primarily focus my attention in this paper on the Wittgensteinian tradition in philosophy of religion. In particular, I am interested in some questions concerning the relation between the philosophical and the personal in Wittgensteinian thought, and I find these questions noteworthy in considering Cottingham's inspiring thoughts about the method of philosophy of religion. Cottingham's *Philosophy of Religion* includes some explicit references to Wittgenstein, but he has also written more extensively on Wittgenstein elsewhere. [6]

Cottingham agrees with Wittgenstein on many central issues. He considers that the view of the later Wittgenstein about "language being embedded in a 'form of life'" offers an important insight into the philosophical study of religion.[7] Religious belief and language cannot be understood apart from the use they have in actual religious and cultural contexts – apart from the lives of religious believers. Cottingham also shares Wittgenstein's view that religious practices and beliefs should not be seen as forms of bad science. They both think that scientific rationalism is seriously misguided: religious beliefs should not be treated as pseudo-scientific theories, for they differ radically from

[6] John Cottingham, "The Lessons of Life: Wittgenstein, Religion and Analytic Philosophy," in *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Hans-Johann Glock and John Hyman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 203–227.

[7] Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 11.

hypotheses and theories in science. It is wholly misleading to treat belief in God as an empirical hypothesis. Instead, Cottingham thinks that it is accurate to say that religious beliefs are, as Wittgenstein says, "something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference".[8] Cottingham argues that this fits well with the "epistemology of involvement" (which is contrasted with the "epistemology of detachment"). According to the "epistemology of involvement", evidence in religious matters is assessed in the light of spiritual and moral experiences which are only available as a result of certain "inner transformations" in an individual's life.[9] These experiences are wholly unlike empirical observations: they are neither repeatable nor impartial, but are instead "lessons of life".

Despite apparent similarities between Cottingham's and Wittgenstein's approaches, there are however some tensions between Cottingham's and Wittgenstein's thought when developed by the most important contemporary Wittgensteinian philosopher of religion, the late D. Z. Phillips.

Like Cottingham, Phillips rejects the Enlightenment conception of rationality and considers that one should not reduce different aspects of human thought to a model of scientific inquiry. However, unlike Cottingham, he emphasises that a certain kind of neutrality is an essential element in philosophical investigation. In many of his works Phillips has developed the notion of philosophy as a form of "contemplation". According to the contemplative conception, the perspective of philosophical inquiry is external to a philosopher's personal religious commitments. In support of this view Phillips refers to the following remark in *Culture and Value*: "My ideal is a certain coolness. A temple providing a setting for the passions without meddling with them."[10] Phillips sees this remark as an expression of the contemplative approach. He refers it to as a "cool" conception of philosophy, which is contrasted with "warm", normative and revisionary approaches in philosophy.[11]

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[8] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 64; Cottingham, "The Lessons of Life," 220–224.

[9] Cottingham, "Lessons of Life," 222–223; Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 22–23.

[10] Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, 2.

[11] Phillips' main work on the method of the contemplative conception of philosophy is *Philosophy's Cool Place* (London: Cornell University Press, 1999). See also D. Z. Phillips, *Religion and the Hermeneutics of Contemplation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Phillips' conception of philosophy is strongly inspired by his former teacher in Swansea, Rush Rhees, who was a student and friend of Wittgenstein. See Rush Rhees, *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). For a discussion of Phillips' contemplative approach, see Anthony F. Sanders, ed., *D. Z. Phillips' Contemplative Philosophy of Religion: Questions and Responses* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Ingolf U. Dalferth and Harmut von Sass, ed., *The Contemplative Spirit* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), 2010; Mikel Burley, *Contemplating Religious Forms of Life* (London: Continuum, 2012).

The aim of the contemplative philosophy of religion is not to provide a rational foundation to our ways of living and thinking. Philosophy does not tell us whether it is rational to believe in God, nor is philosophy a guide to human conduct. Instead, the task of contemplative philosophy is to do conceptual justice to the variety of the world. Like Cottingham, Phillips thinks that the central problem with standard philosophy of religion is linked with the abstract level of discussion, and he often uses literary examples in his philosophical works with the purpose of elucidating religious matters. He thinks that the conceptual clarification of religious beliefs requires close attention to various aspects of religious life: a serious philosophical work in this field requires a sensitivity to religious issues. But his central concern is however different from what Cottingham has in mind. As a philosopher, Phillips thinks that his task is to illuminate and contemplate the different possibilities of understanding religious thought. Typically, his main concern is also critical: it is to show that philosophers are misguided by "the craving for generality"[12] in constructing abstract metaphysical theories.

Phillips contends that the task of theology and philosophy must be distinguished from each other. He holds that theology has a normative function. It determines what makes sense when talking about God. Theology is a form of religious activity. "Theologians are the guardians of the [religious] pictures."[13] The task of philosophy is different. Philosophy investigates sense and meaning, it does not determine the truth or rationality of religious beliefs. Philosophers contemplate religion without an intention to reform, defend or criticise religious beliefs. It leaves religious differences and disagreement as they are: it does not try to solve them, but it tries to understand them and do them justice. However, philosophy is also a critical activity. A central task of philosophy is to clarify conceptual confusions, and a philosopher may show that some theological differences are connected to conceptual confusions. Philosophy offers conceptual clarity, but conceptual clarity as such does not tell us what we should do in the face of intelligible religious alternatives.[14]

Cottingham, in turn, stands in the tradition of "faith seeking understanding": he does not make a sharp distinction between theology and philosophy, nor does he think that philosophy of religion leaves everything as it is. In criticising the neutralist model Cottingham is not criticising the idea that philosophy aims at offering answers to religious questions. He says in fact that "the question of whether theism or naturalism constitutes a more coherent and compelling outlook is … central to

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[12] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue & Brown Books* (London: Harper Perennial, 1965), 17.

[13] D. Z. Phillips, *Religion and Friendly Fire* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 87.

[14] See e.g. D. Z. Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion* (London: St. Martin's Press), Chapter 1; Phillips, *Religion and Friendly Fire*, 87–88.

the philosophy of religion",[15] and in his book he defends the theistic worldview against naturalism. In addition, he takes a sympathetic stance towards Pierre Hadot, who has shown in his famous studies that in antiquity philosophy was concerned with "the art of living". For ancients, philosophy was a way of life. It was not only a theoretical matter but "a method of spiritual progress which demanded a radical conversion and transformation of the individual's way of being".[16] In the same spirit, Cottingham thinks that abstract analysis alone is not enough for the serious practice of the philosophy of religion.[17] The practice of philosophy has to do with changes in our own personal self-understanding and with various kinds of elements in the religious life which are found in literature, music and scriptures.

Phillips' contemplative conception leads in a rather different direction. Philosophy does not tell you how to live, and in this sense it is not understood as a way of life. He claims that for Wittgenstein "[a]ny suggestion of the philosopher as the sage who points us in the right spiritual or moral direction would be anathema".[18] Phillips rejects all efforts to offer a philosophical foundation to our forms of life and world pictures. Instead, a philosopher is "content with contemplating where we already are".[19] He often quotes Wittgenstein's famous remark in *Investigations*: "What has to be accepted, the given, is – one could say – forms of life."[20]

Phillips' central point could be formulated as follows: an external foundation for our practices is a conceptual impossibility. A metaphysical perspective that comes from nowhere is an illusion based on a misleading view of the relationship between language and reality. There is no "truth as such" or "meaning as such" that exists independently of our practices. A philosopher cannot offer a general external perspective on reality which is independent of actual human practices. There is no Archimedean point, no neutral rational point of view from which a philosopher can evaluate the truth of human practices and which is independent of them. The assumption that there is a practice-independent point of view is thus not only false but nonsensical.

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[15] Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2–3.

[16] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 265.

[17] Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 149–150.

[18] D. Z. Phillips, "Locating Philosophy's Cool Place," in *D. Z. Phillips' Contemplative Philosophy of Religion: Questions and Responses*, ed. Anthony F. Sanders (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 41.

[19] Phillips, *Philosophy's Cool Place*, 163

[20] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd edn. (London: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 226.

Phillips connects Wittgenstein's criticism of metaphysics with the criticism of "the absolute conception of the world". Phillips characterises metaphysics as "the attempt to give a general account of the reality of 'all things'". This attempt obscures the variety of the world.[21] Rather, philosophical enquiry – the grammatical investigation of the actual use of language – reveals a variety of meanings and conceptions of reality and truth which cannot be reduced to any single paradigm.

Wittgenstein says in *Zettel*: "The philosopher is not a member of any community of ideas. That is what makes him into a philosopher."[22] Phillips' contemplative conception echoes this remark: as mentioned, he is strongly against advocacy in moral philosophy and philosophy of religion. However, one can speak about ethical demands in philosophical inquiry. The ethical demand is to do justice to moral and religious views which are at variance with philosophers' own commitments. Phillips stresses that this makes hard ethical demands on a philosopher who has strong moral or religious commitments of his own.[23] An analogy exists between contemplative philosophy and literature. A contemplative philosopher, like a great writer, shows the variety of the world and tries to do justice to different ways of speaking, acting and thinking. The task of great literature and the task of contemplative philosophy is to show the world in all its variety and complexity. However, Phillips admits that in philosophical investigation the distinction between the philosophical and the personal is not always clear cut. For example, following Wittgenstein, Phillips thinks that James Frazer in developing his view of religion as a form of primitive pseudoscience was blind to the meaning of religious beliefs and rituals. Some possibilities were closed to Frazer on account of his own limitations: the confused account of religious practices Frazer gives is connected to his lack of imagination and religious sensibility.[24]

Philosophy and Moral Values

Cottingham's and Phillips' approaches to moral philosophy help one to understand some profound differences between their philosophical methods. Cottingham stands in the tradition of philosophy

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[21] Phillips, *Wittgenstein and Religion*, 233–234.

[22] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and Georg Henrik von Wright, transl. G. E. M. Anscombe (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Basil Blackwell, 1967), § 455.

[23] Phillips, *Hermeneutics*, 245; Peter Winch, "Doing Justice or Giving the Devil his Due," in *Can Religion Be Explained Away?*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (London: Macmillan, 1996), 173.

[24] Phillips, "Locating," 43. Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," in *Philosophical Occasions: 1912-1951*, ed. James C. Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993).

of religion that stresses the primacy of the moral in religion. The central focus of religion is not in metaphysical theories, instead religion has to do with "the deep structural problems of human life", which are primarily connected with "our pressing need for moral transformation".[25] Cottingham contrasts theistic view of ethics with secular views, and he argues that there is a significant connection between theistic beliefs and morality. He develops his conception by appealing to theological considerations, but at the same time he argues that common moral experiences support the theistic view of the objectivity of moral values. He argues that ordinary ethical discourse and common experience of moral demands need a transcendent source, and, in his view, a theistic framework offers an adequate ground for the authority of obligations and for the objectivity of values. He appeals to people's moral intuitions in defending the objectivity of values: most people think that ethical demands are not just matters of subjective feeling of taste: "we all *talk* of obligations, and nearly everyone has a strong *sense* of obligations as constraints on conduct".[26] He claims that these intuitions are echoed in contemporary discussions of secular moral philosophy. Cottingham refers here to philosophers, such as Derek Parfit, John McDowell and Christine Korsgaard, who have tried to do justice to the ordinary intuitions concerning the objectivity of moral demands and who have tried to develop models of the idea of obligation within a secular and naturalistic worldview.[27] Cottingham argues that none of these attempts have been successful. Objectivism about value needs a teleological framework which is an essential part of the theistic worldview: "[W]ithout some kind of teleological framework for understanding the nature and ultimate destiny of humanity, there seems no basis for regarding any of the many competing impulses and goals that provide us with reasons to act having overdriving normative force."[28]

The teleological picture of reality associated with theism offers a serious alternative to secular ethics, and it can be defended by appealing to common features of human experiences. However, Cottingham does not see the theistic picture as the "best theory of ethics" which can be defended by the use of coercive philosophical argument.[29] Although the theistic vision or picture of reality "resonates with many of our deepest human sensibilities", Cottingham notes that it cannot be

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[25] Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 72.

[26] Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 88.

[27] Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 89–94.

[28] Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 94. "[T]he theistic worldview is of a cosmos that is fundamentally benign: a cosmos where the natural world reflects a goodness and beauty stemming from the divine source of all reality, where our human moral impulses orient us towards an eternal and objective moral order, and the deepest fulfilment of our human nature lies in responding to the imperatives of love and justice." Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 98.

[29] Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 94–95.

defended by arguments that "could convince every sceptic". [30] In any case, his arguments for theism are directed towards a general philosophical audience, and in this respect there is an apologetical dimension in his thought.

Phillips' approach to moral philosophy is quite different. His thought is characterised by a certain sort of pluralism, and he opposes all efforts to formulate general theories of morality. In practising moral philosophy, Phillips "intervenes" in moral philosophy by criticising philosophers' tendency to generalise about moral issues and ignore the heterogeneity of ethics.[31] The task of philosophers is to try to provide conceptual clarification and elucidation to the complex moral phenomena in human life. The aim of contemplative philosophers is not to provide a neutral or objective standard by which we can choose between rival or diverse moral perspectives and practices. Phillips' attacks on the deep-seated "presumption of theory" in contemporary moral philosophy, i.e. the effort to give a general theoretical account of morality. In his view, this effort is fundamentally misguided. Its basic problem "lies in assumption that there is an essence of something called Morality".[32] In the light of this assumption, the variety of different ethical practices is ruled out: one ethical theory is held up as the metaphysical essence of moral values and conceptions. In contrast to that, a contemplative moral philosopher, as a philosopher, does not advocate any particular moral ethical practice, but clears away confused accounts of morality. In criticising moral philosophy, Phillips is not offering a theory of his own, instead he is trying to pay attention to a variety of actual moral points of view and do justice to different moral possibilities.[33] Philosophers should not make moral matters less complicated and tidier that they are. There is an irreducible variety of moral opinions, and this diversity is something that is a given: "'They are there like our life'. It may said that if our moral perspectives and practices are different, we could not go on. To which we should reply: that is how we go on."[34]

This means that a philosopher cannot argue in the name of philosophy that one all-embracing moral system – e.g. a secular or Christian position – is better or more reasonable than their alternatives. This may sound like relativism, but it would be a problematic way of characterising Phillips' views, for it is not clear what "relativism" in this context means. If relativism is understood as a

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[30] Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 97.

[31] D. Z. Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1992).

[32] Phillips, *Interventions*, viii.

[33] It is worth noting, however, that the concept of morality has some limits, for without these limits we could not know what is meant by morality at all. "In order for a belief to be a moral belief it must be related to a range of characteristic notions: truth, loyalty, kindness, generosity, courage, patience, etc." Phillips, *Interventions*, 106.

[34] Phillips, *Interventions*, xv.

philosophical theory in which different ethical values are equally valid, Phillips is not advocating relativism. As we have seen, he attacks the idea that philosophical investigation offers the foundation for our values, obligations and our views of good life. The idea that philosophy can offer a theoretical or intellectual justification for universally valid (context-independent) moral theory is both false and confused. Phillips is not claiming that every view is as good as any other. Instead, he denies that moral beliefs stand "in need of a further justification in terms of criteria of validity and invalidity which are supposed to be independent of them".[35] It is absurd to say that all moral beliefs are equally valid, for "validity" here has no sense at all. In describing the actual use of language, a philosopher can say that "one moral belief is as much a moral belief as any other", but this is "*not a moral judgement*".[36] Thus, "[t]here is no contradiction in saying that a point of view is a moral point of view and holding at the same time that the view is morally wrong".[37]

The starting point of moral evaluation is given. Moral considerations start from somewhere and are constitutive of our ways thinking and acting. Moral thought does not start from radical doubt that questions every actual ethical perspectives. Neither philosophy nor anything else can offer a practice-independent yardstick for assessing different moral positions, for the assessment logically depends on our moral practices.

One problem in moral philosophy is linked with the notion of belief. Although we talk about different moral "beliefs" and "opinions", these words have here a different use than they have in ordinary epistemic or scientific contexts. Phillips says that:

> […]moral beliefs are not hypotheses awaiting some kind of verification. Neither are they conclusions based on a system of antecedent reasons. This being so, moral beliefs do not stand in need of further proof. […] Moral beliefs express what people find morally important. These beliefs express parameters of right and wrong. The beliefs cannot be contrasted with knowledge. The term 'belief' in this context is synonymous with 'conviction'.[38]

According to Phillips, the personal element in ethical choices is a *constitutive* part of them. It makes no sense to think that moral values are independent of what an individual thinks: ethical problems cannot be solved by someone else. There are no experts in moral matters. In this respect they differ

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[35] Phillips, *Interventions*, 106.

[36] Phillips, *Interventions*, 106.

[37] Phillips, *Interventions*, 107.

[38] Phillips, *Interventions*, 105–106.

radically from empirical questions. Moral truths do not exhibit the same kind of agreement as we find in our empirical judgements.[39] Phillips radically questions the idea that philosophy can offer moral theories that can offer objective answers to moral questions. A philosopher has to recognise the variety of ethical perspectives and the existence of moral truths, i.e., moral convictions that are at odds with one other.[40]

Final reflections

There are differences between Phillips' and Cottingham's philosophical method. In contrast to Cottingham, Phillips makes a sharp distinction between the non-normative philosophical approach and the personal confessional approach, which offers normative answers to religious questions. However, one could ask whether Phillips' philosophical accounts of religious beliefs are really theologically neutral. His actual philosophical reflections on religious possibilities are coloured by his personal sympathy for a theological tradition represented by Simone Weil and Søren Kierkegaard. For example, it is obvious that his own ethical and religious passions characterise his criticism of contemporary theodicies.[41] Phillips himself is aware of the difficulty of achieving the ideal of contemplative philosophy and he openly admits that there are personal dimensions in his philosophy of religion. There are good reasons to doubt that in religious matters the personal and the philosophical can be distinguished from each other as sharply as Phillips sometimes seems to do.[42] However, I think he is on the right track in claiming that a sense of religious beliefs can also be available to those who do not personally commit themselves to these beliefs. One does not need to be a believer in order to understand, and philosophers can clarify beliefs they do not share. Cottingham, to my mind, does not deny that, although he speaks about "accessibility conditions" in a religious context. But what is at issue in the dispute between the normative and descriptive

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[39] Phillips, *Friendly Fire*, 82.

[40] Phillips insists that philosophy does not serve as a guide to right conduct, and, interestingly, he also thinks, following Peter Winch, that it is misleading to say that morality itself is such a guide. Winch has argued that this way of seeing the place of morality in human life is common in moral philosophy. Firstly, moral philosophers assume that we are agents who act on the world and effect changes by doing so. Secondly, it is assumed that morality is a guide which tells us what kind of changes we should make and how to overcome obstacles and achieve our life's goals. According to Winch, this is a confusing picture. We cannot say that morality helps us to solve our difficulties, for without morality there would be no difficulties. Morality is a constitutive element of how we approach situations in our life. Morality itself determines for us the problems and the alternatives for action. Morality itself "puts obstacles in our path" and, therefore, it is "a strange sort of guide". Peter Winch, *Ethics and Action* (London: Routledge), 171–172; quoted in Phillips, *Philosophy's Cool Place*, 125. See also Phillips, *Interventions*, 65–66.

[41] D. Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and the Problem of God* (London: SCM Press, 2014).

[42] For a recent discussion on this theme, see Genia Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the Spheres: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Chapter 2.

approaches is the question of what can philosophy contribute to religious life and ethics when one rejects the foundationalist model of philosophy. If conceptual analysis and philosophical hermeneutics are at the core of philosophy, philosophical investigation only offers a modest amount of wisdom in debates over religion. Religious and moral practices also "come first" in the sense that people often take religious and ethical issues very seriously and they do not wait for what experts in philosophy have to say about them. I guess that only a few of us would think that the religious disagreements of humankind can be solved by philosophical discussion.

Needless to say, in the context of modern culture the practice of philosophy is not tied to philosophical schools of thought in the same way as they were in antiquity. At universities, philosophy of religion, at the organisational and institutional level, should not be committed to some specific religious, confessional and ideological programme. They should also recognise the plurality of worldviews in democratic liberal societies.

Cottingham is not, of course, suggesting anything that contradicts these views. Like Wittgenstein, Cottingham holds that philosophy is not a theory or a doctrine, but rather an activity. Although he partly shares Hadot's classical view of philosophy, he considers that philosophy does not offer knowledge but instead organises what is known.[43] On the last page of the book he says that philosophy does not settle religious matters definitively, but helps us see more clearly what is at stake.[44] These formulations are not far from Phillips' own position. Although Cottingham stands in the tradition of philosophical theism, he, unlike many contemporary analytical theists, does not think that a genuine understanding of Christianity needs much metaphysical speculation. Cottingham's approach, which is strongly influenced by Thomistic classical theism, is much closer to Phillips' insights than the contemporary form of theistic personalism.[45]

The debate over worldviews is, of course, only one theme in philosophy of religion. It is possible to analyse religious phenomena without assuming that the research has any personal religious significance or that the research has anything to do with the truth of religious doctrines. For example, those who are interested in the history of philosophy often deal with theological questions, as theology has been an influential part of the history of Western thought. In this case, the interests of study may be purely philosophical when, for example, philosophers explore how philosophical

[43] Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 9.

[44] Cottingham, *Philosophy of Religion*, 176.

[45] See D. Z. Phillips, ed., *Whose God? Which Tradition? (*Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

ideas developed in medieval theology.[46] At least in this sense philosophical analysis may offer a religiously neutral understanding of theological doctrines. [47]

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[46] Simo Knuuttila, "Philosophers Dealing with Religious Matters," in *Perspectives in Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Timo Koistinen and Tommi Lehtonen (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola-Society, 2000), 201–219.

[47] This article is partly based on my talks presented at the Literature in Philosophy of Religion Seminar at the University of Helsinki in May 2017 and in Nordic Society of Philosophy for Religion Conference at the University of Oslo August 2017. I thank various participants in these meetings for their helpful comments.

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Timo Koistinen

University Lecturer in Philosophy of Religion

University of Helsinki